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AUTHOR Glatthorn, Alan A.
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ABSTRACT

The curricular recommendations of the current educational-reform movement are discussed and their likely effects on at-risk youth are considered. Current reform efforts tend to focus on three major curricular changes: (1) increase the number of academic courses required to graduate from high school; (2) increase the time for education; and (3) end social promotion and promote on the basis of achievement. A look at the probable effects of these reforms suggests that increasing academic requirements will serve only to penalize at-risk youth and that increasing the time devoted to learning will have only modest effects, if any, on their achievement. Research suggests that retaining at-risk students is likely only to waste an additional year. More effective alternatives would include a quality curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking and problem solving and has relevance to the life experiences of the student. Improved instructional technology, which includes appropriate teaching methods, would benefit at-risk students in particular. Field learning would provide experiential knowledge that could facilitate broad development for marginal students. (Contains 29 references.) (SLD)

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Alan A. Glatthorn

Research for Better Schools
444 North Third Street
Philadelphia, PA 19123

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CURRICULUM REFORM AND "AT-RISK" YOUTH

It is the intent of this paper to examine briefly the curricular recommendations of the current "reform" movement, to assess their likely effects on "at-risk" youth, and to suggest some alternatives to those recommendations.

Curriculum Recommendations

An analysis of the several commission reports (see, for example, The College Board, 1983; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, 1983; Twentieth Century Fund, 1983) and a review of several related documents indicate that current efforts to reform the American schools tend to focus on three major changes that relate directly to the curriculum.

1. Increase the number of academic courses required to graduate from high school. Here the specific recommendations of the National Commission are typical. According to the commission, all students seeking a high school diploma should complete the following requirements during the four years of high school:

- 4 years of English
- 3 years of mathematics
- 3 years of social studies
- 3 years of science
- ½ year of computer science

Except for the one-half year of computer science, all of this looks rather familiar, even though the commission is presumptuous enough to call the list "the Five New Basics." (The capital letters are theirs, not mine.) State legislatures have obviously been listening. A recent survey conducted by Education Week (February 6, 1985) indicated that 45 states (including Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware) have already increased their graduation requirements and five were considering such changes at the time of the article.

2. Increase the time for education. The National Commission report, along with several other commentaries, emphasizes the importance of increasing instructional time by adding days to the school year, lengthening the school day, and making more efficient use of time. Only Ernest Boyer (1983) seems to demur. He makes this observation: "Many school people seem more concerned about how long students stay in school than they are about what students should know when they depart... More substance, not more time, is our urgent problem."

3. End social promotion; promote on the basis of achievement. Both the National Commission report and the National Science Board (1983) recommend that results on standardized achievement tests be used to determine promotion from one grade to the next. And Philadelphia is one of many large urban districts that have begun to implement such "achievement-based" promotion policies.

In a sense, then, the curricular aspects of reform can be summarized in this fashion: more academics, for a longer period of time, with stricter standards.

The Probable Impact on "At-Risk" Youth

While it is relatively simple to express strong opinions about the likely impact of such changes, it is much more difficult to make an objective assessment. All one can do is examine the evidence available and draw some tentative inferences from that evidence.

The Impact: More Academics

In assessing the impact of increasing the academic requirements, it would be useful to differentiate between its likely effects on college preparatory students and "at-risk" youth. In general, the research suggests that college preparatory students would benefit from such an emphasis. A careful review of the evidence by Alexander and Pallas (1983) concluded that the test scores of students who completed the "new basics" are considerably higher than the scores of those who do not. Such a conclusion seems reasonable enough; more courses in mathematics should improve scores on mathematics tests.

But even for college preparatory youth, the findings are not conclusive. Here a study by Echternacht (1977) is illuminating. He compared high schools whose SAT scores had remained stable or increased slightly between 1965 and 1976 with a group whose scores had declined more than the national average. His findings are of importance here: the differences in the number of academic courses in the two groups of schools were insignificant; the English curricula were highly similar; pass-fail grading and non-traditional offerings had expanded to the same extent; many high schools with decreasing scores had increased the amount of homework and basic skills instruction.

What would be the effects of increased academic courses on "at-risk" youth? My review of the evidence leads me to conclude that the effects would in general be more negative than positive. Since this is one of the central concerns of this paper, let me analyze this issue at somewhat greater length.

The new basics would result in an inequitable allocation of resources. While there are those like Finn (1984), for example, who argue that there is no essential conflict between "excellence" and "equity," I believe that there is a pervasive tension. Resources are finite -- and shrinking. Every dollar allocated to funding the new basics is a dollar taken from Chapter 1. Here I find Newmann and Kelly (1983) rather persuasive. They argue quite cogently that the commitment to equality is more fundamental than the pursuit of excellence; thus it is manifestly unjust to distribute resources so that fast students can achieve excellence if doing so entails the sacrifice of resources necessary for the slow to achieve competence and dignity.

For "at-risk" youth, more mathematics is not better mathematics. One of the pervasive weaknesses of all these reform pronouncements is that they have almost totally ignored the issue of curriculum quality, an issue that is especially relevant for "at-risk" youth who seem to have less tolerance for boredom and banality. Consider these salient attributes of low-track classes that Goodlad (1984) noted in his comparison of high and low-track sections: more rote learning; more emphasis on conforming as opposed to independent thinking; lower student satisfaction; less teacher clarity, enthusiasm, and organization; and, from the students' perceptions, more punitive and less caring teachers. Bereiter (1985) makes essentially the same points when he cautions educators not to rely too much on direct

instruction as a panacea for educational disadvantagement. He notes that when he returned to classrooms a month after an initial visit, he saw teachers using the same direct instruction techniques to "grind away at the same concepts" (p. 541).

Increasing the academic requirements is likely to lead to increased rates of failure for "at-risk" youth. It is quite probable that the additional courses in social studies, science, and mathematics will use the same approaches as presently used -- approaches that by their nature seem not to be very effective for "at-risk" youth. Wehlage (1983) observes that the "best kind" of academic course in the traditional high school program frequently pre-supposes the ability of students to engage in abstract thinking; and to the marginal student who has not made the transition to this type of thinking, instruction seems to be carried on in a foreign language. If past practice is any criterion, it seems unlikely that more "at-risk" youth will receive the kind of instruction they need to make the transition to abstract thinking.

Making the high school curriculum more rigorous ignores the fact that for "at-risk" youth the earlier years are more critical. There is a growing body of evidence that the elementary grades are the crucial years for "at-risk" youth. Here Becker and Gersten's (1982) research is instructive. Their review of follow-up studies of intervention programs concludes that the children in Follow Through programs who have made great gains in primary reading and mathematics are likely to lose ground against their middle-income peers if they do not receive high quality instruction in the intermediate grades. And Alexander and Cook (1982) note that experiences during the primary grades may be of greatest consequences for later achievement.

Thus, a reasoned analysis of the available evidence suggests that increasing academic requirements will serve in general to penalize "at-risk" youth.

The Impact: More Time

The argument that providing increased time will result in greater achievement has both a common sense appeal and some support in the literature. It seems reasonable to conclude that providing more time to learn will result in greater learning, and there is a body of evidence to support that common sense conclusion. (See, for example, Berliner, 1984.) However, there also is some evidence to the contrary. First, Husen (1967) observes in his IEA study of international mathematics achievement that the amount of instructional time and the amount of homework time had only small effects on achievement. And Stedman and Smith's (1983) review of all the comparative data on achievement across nations leads them to conclude that cultural factors are more salient than time allotments.

Further doubt on the efficacy of simply increasing time is shed by an interesting study by Levin, Glass, and Meister (1984), who performed an analysis of the cost-effectiveness of four interventions for improving reading and mathematics scores: cross-age tutoring, computer-assisted instruction, reduced class size, and increased instructional time. Their analysis led them to conclude that cross-age tutoring would be highest in cost-effectiveness -- and increased instructional time would yield the least benefit in relation to cost.

The final review which casts doubt on this obsession with time is one conducted by Karweit (1983) for the National Commission. After reviewing

all the studies on the relationship between time-on-task and achievement, Karweit concludes as follows: "...the review conducted here concludes that, by a variety of criteria for the importance of an effect, the most outstanding finding relating the effects of time-on-task to learning is that the effects are as small as they are" (p. 46).

So we may reasonably conclude that increasing the time devoted to academic subjects may have modest effects, if any, on the achievement of "at-risk" youth.

The Impact: Rigorous Promotional Standards

The final proposal is that students should be promoted solely on the basis of achievement, rather than on the basis of chronological age. Here it is relatively simple to assess the likely impact of this proposed change on "at-risk" youth. In what I consider to be an objective review of 44 carefully designed studies, Holmes and Matthews (1984) conclude that the retention of elementary and junior high pupils has the following effects:

- Their achievement in the subsequent year is lower.
- They make a less satisfactory emotional adjustment.
- They have a diminished self-image.
- They have a less positive attitude toward school.

They conclude as follows:

> Those who continue to retain pupils at grade level do so despite cumulative research evidence showing that the potential for negative effects consistently outweighs positive outcomes. Because this cumulative research evidence consistently points to negative effects of non-promotion, the burden of proof legitimately falls on proponents of retention plans to show there is a compelling logic indicating success of their plans when so many others have failed (p. 232).

One additional review sheds some further light on the optimal timing of retention, if it is to be used as a means of increasing achievement. In a recent analysis of who benefits most from retention, Medway and Rose (in press) conclude that the educational benefits of retention are greatest in the first and second grades and are of little educational benefit beyond the sixth grade.

It thus seems reasonable to conclude that all those "at-risk" youth who are retained in junior high school will simply waste one year growing older.

More Effective Alternatives

There are several options ready at hand that would seem to have greater power for improving the educational attainments of "at-risk" youth. Let me review those options briefly in the hope that those in policy-making positions will take the time for a more careful analysis.

A Quality Curriculum

I argue here for a sharply focused curriculum that sacrifices breadth for depth, coverage for understanding, and quantity for quality. My review of curricula developed especially for "at-risk" youth indicates that most of them attempt to cover too much content, dwell on inconsequential learnings, and result in mind-numbing repetition of content.

What would characterize a quality curriculum for "at-risk" youth? The following features seem worthy of note.

- An emphasis on critical thinking and problem solving. While there is much current interest in teaching critical thinking in the schools, most of these new and revised courses seem designed for more able youth. We need instead to take special pains to improve the

thinking and problem-solving skills of "at-risk" youth. After analyzing the nature of the changing economy, Gisi and Forbes (1982) conclude that these are the "basics" of tomorrow: evaluation and analysis skills, critical thinking, problem-solving strategies, organization and reference skills, synthesis, application, creativity, decision making, and communication. Such skills, I would argue, must be especially emphasized for "at-risk" youth if we are to avoid the dangers of becoming a two-class society -- the thinkers and the thoughtless.

- An emphasis on developing concepts and improving vocabulary. Most curricula for "at-risk" students emphasize the comprehension of information and the application of rote learning and slight concept development. If we sharply reduce the information load of the curriculum, then teachers can spend more time teaching the key concepts in each discipline. Such an emphasis on concepts and vocabulary would both improve understanding in that discipline and also improve reading comprehension. After reviewing the research on the teaching of reading and language to the disadvantaged, Becker (1977) concludes that teaching vocabulary concept knowledge would be the single most effective way of improving reading comprehension.

- An appropriate use of the life experiences of "at-risk" youth. While this does not seem to be a good time to speak of curricular relevance, the testimony of successful teachers strongly suggests that there are effective ways to use the life experiences of "at-risk" youth without trivializing the curriculum or invading their privacy. Consider these examples:

  -- a mathematics unit on probability that helps students assess their chances in the casino slots

  -- an English unit on the nature of dialects and the changes in Black and Hispanic English

  -- a unit in social studies which helps students understand how political candidates are really chosen in their city

  -- a unit in science which examines both the scientific and political aspects of pollution control.

  Such units would have immediate appeal to "at-risk" youth while enabling the teacher to teach some critical thinking skills and some essential concepts of that discipline.

- An emphasis on communication skills. Obviously, communication skills are needed -- but such an emphasis on communication skills should not call up discouraging visions of studying grammar and learning phonics. A better curriculum for "at-risk" students would embody contemporary approaches to those essential skills. We know now how to teach writing as a communication process, and there is persuasive evidence that emphasizing the consequences of such writing is a powerful means of both improving writing and cognition. (See, for example, Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1981). And we know how to use current knowledge of reading comprehension to give less verbal students the skills they need to read with greater understanding: set a reading purpose, choose appropriate strategies, connect ideas in text, monitor comprehension, and correct comprehension failures. (See, for example, Paris, Oka, & DeBritto, 1983.)

This is a curriculum of quality, a curriculum of power.

An Improved Instructional Technology

The second major change needed is the implementation of an improved instructional technology for "at-risk" youth -- an important change by and large ignored by the reformers. Let me merely sketch in the key features of such a technology since much of the research has been widely disseminated and discussed.

For part of their instruction, teachers of "at-risk" youth would use the basic instructional processes that have proved to be effective with such students. Brophy's (1982) summary is useful here:

- Approach instruction with a positive attitude that such students can learn.
- Use time efficiently so that ample opportunity to learn is provided.
- Manage the classroom efficiently and plan instruction carefully.
- Pace students rapidly, in small steps, with a high success rate.

- Use active teaching strategies, with much demonstrating, explaining, and active engagement.
- Teach to mastery by making sure that new knowledge and skills are mastered to the point of overlearning.
- Provide a supportive learning environment.

For part of their instruction, teachers would make effective use of cooperative learning strategies supplemented with appropriate individualization. One of the most promising instructional strategies for use with "at-risk" youth seems to be Team Assisted Individualization (TAI), which Slavin (1980) notes is a cooperative learning intervention specifically developed to improve the outcomes of mainstreaming for "mildly academically handicapped" youth. TAI, which uses a combination of cooperative learning and individualization, has been demonstrated to be effective in improving attitudes, behavior, and achievement with this population.

For part of their instruction, teachers in academic classes would make appropriate use of computers to teach information processing skills, to teach essential concepts, and to provide diagnosis and remediation. Rather than suggesting that every student take one semester of computer science, as the National Commission recommends, it seems to make more sense to use computers extensively throughout the curriculum for "at-risk" youth. These students do not need a basic course in computer literacy; they need to use the computer as an important means of learning. As several others have pointed out, the widespread use of computers in the home may widen the gap between poor and middle-class children unless the schools makes computers widely available for all "at-risk" youth.

We have the pieces for this instructional technology already available; we need only the will, the resources, and the know-how to put the system into place.

Experiential Learning Through Field Experiences

One of the most promising means of improving the achievement and facilitating the development of "at-risk" youth is the effective use of field experiences as a means of providing experiential learning. Wehlage (1983) makes a cogent argument for this intervention. He points out that the critical need of marginal high school students is what he terms social bonding, a developmental process of achieving attachment, commitment, belief, and involvement in the life of home and school. There are two requirements for such social bonding to develop: the adolescent must develop the ability to use abstract thinking; and the adolescent must shift from an egocentric to a sociocentric point of view. He faults the usual remedies for marginal youth -- remediation, vocational skills training, and job experience -- for not facilitating either of these essential types of growth. And his review of the evidence indicates that experiential education, through carefully directed field experiences, has the potential to facilitate such broad development for marginal youth.

Conclusion

So the choice seems rather clear. We can offer "at-risk" youth either more academics for more time, using the threat of retention to motivate them; or we can offer a more exciting curriculum, with more effective teaching supplemented by productive field experiences. Both the research and my own experience would suggest that the latter would be the better answer.

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